

RECONSTRUCTION – FROM THE VENICE CHARTER TO THE CHARTER OF CRACOW 2000

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The most debated question in relation to the restoration of historic monuments is about reconstruction. There is a long list of doubts: Are we allowed at all to reconstruct a destroyed monument or part of it? To what extent? Should the reconstructed part be just like the original was? If no, then what should it be like? If we reconstruct, can the end result be regarded as a monument? If not, then what is it? All this has been closely connected to the question of authenticity, especially since UNESCO made it one of the cornerstones of declaring that something is part of the World Heritage.

It would be banal to claim at this forum that statutes of monument restoration in the form of the Venice Charter have existed since 1964. Indeed, the Charter provides reliable guidelines for restorers about restorations and conservations. This document has almost become a classic, it sets an example because - amongst many other things - it does not contain dogmatic, rigid rules. Instead, it offers an opportunity for the expert to analyse and review the situation. Every monument is different, and each should be treated differently - this is what the Venice Charter suggests.

However, when it comes to reconstruction, we look for the same flexibility in vain. "All reconstruction work should... be ruled out 'a priori'" - states the Charter. It is striking, though, that this can be found under Article 15., which describes excavations. The sentence quoted continues: "...and only anastylosis can potentially be permitted." From this, many conclude that Piero Gazzola and his colleagues were this strict only in the case of ruins, not other reconstructions, for example the re-construction of buildings. Others who are against the Venice Charter or who demand its revision argue that this is exactly why the Charter is out of date and does not hold for our time.

Being a person who knew Gazzola and had the opportunity to speak to him, I think that the categorical statement made by this Charter does not only refer to ruins but is universal. We know that the Charter was drawn up by its authors at the congress in Venice during one night, which -alongside its splendour- can be clearly seen. This work that included improvisation, too, could result in the fact that a principle so important in restoration was put into a less significant place instead of being highlighted as a separate chapter or article at least. If this is so, then we can accept my previous statement, which says the Venice Charter was against any reconstruction in general.

Having said all this, I partially contradict myself at once. It is well known that the congress in Venice in 1964 decided to set up ICOMOS, but officially it was only founded in the following year, in Poland, at the first congress held in Cracow and Warsaw. Yes, Warsaw, the city where people armed themselves twice to heroically fight Nazi occupation and which, after this, had been systematically destroyed, vandalized. And again the Warsaw, which was restored by its inhabitants by reconstructing the old town. There is no doubt that with the congress in Venice deciding to hold the first congress in Poland, ICOMOS expressed its great admiration for heroism in the face of fascism, and also for the Varsovians' decision not to let the history of their capital and their own past perish, as for them, national identity and the declaration that their will to live is stronger than fascism comes first. Strictly in terms of a monument protection language, the reconstruction of the old town in Warsaw could not prevent ICOMOS from holding part of its first statutory meeting there.

I have also personal experience about Piero Gazzola - and I do not mention him by chance, as primarily, he was the author of the Venice Charter - never rigidly insisted on ruling out reconstruction in the case of destruction by war. I participated at a conference organised by the Soviet ICOMOS committee in Leningrad in 1969. It was a memorable occasion for me because that was the time of my debut in ICOMOS. We were taken on visits to famous palaces near the city. It is well known that the war seriously damaged these buildings, too, and they were being restored at the time. We could see some rooms in ruins and others that had already been restored. Reconstructed, that is. As a result of excellent and painstaking work, they were just like before the war, which was proven by large photographs. These also showed the condition they were in after the destruction, before restoration. I witnessed a conversation between Gazzola and a well-known Hungarian monuments expert, who seriously condemned the reconstruction. Gazzola listened for a while then politely interrupted and assured him he agreed with what could be seen.

I think we need to be less strict about objecting against reconstruction in the case of destruction by war. There are probably a lot of restorations where pre-war were reconstructed. The Germans in retreat in World War II blew up every bridge in my country, Budapest was no exception. These bridges were restored to their original state, that is, they were reconstructed. I do not think there is any expert in the field who would have objected to this. Probably the same

goes for the famous bridge in Mostar, blown up by the Croats during the recent war on the Balkans: there is hardly an alternative to reconstruction. If another solution was chosen, that must have had another reason, and not disagreement with reconstruction in principle. In the English town of Coventry, that was demolished by the Germans – ‘Ich werde ihre Städte ausradieren’, shouted Hitler – the destroyed cathedral was left as a memento against war and a modern one was built beside it. There were other reasons why Buda Castle, which burnt out in the war, was not restored to its original state in Budapest: in the 1950s and 60s, when restoration work was carried out, there was such aversion on the part of the public and even the experts to the architecture tending towards art-nouveau style of the beginning of the 20th century that they rather went for a new internal and external finish. I am certain that one or two decades later, when art nouveau regained the standing it deserved, they would have decided otherwise.

It was the Charter of Cracow 2000 that for the first time dealt with the reconstructive restoration of damage caused by war and the reconstruction of buildings that perished. It says the following about this: “Reconstruction of an entire building, destroyed by armed conflict or natural disaster, is only acceptable if there are exceptional social or cultural motives that are related to the identity of the entire community.” The reconstruction of the Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche) in Dresden is being carried out according to this. I have spoken to several people from Dresden and could see for myself that it is an “exceptional social motive” for the inhabitants of the city to see their beautiful Baroque church as a building again instead of a huge heap of ruins as memorial of the war and the devastating bombing (as it had been decided in the GDR.)

With the easing of strong feelings against reconstruction, there have lately been reconstructions carried out that – at least in my opinion – can neither be approved of, nor justified on the basis of one single document on monument protection. This mostly happens in the case of ruins and the reasoning usually says that the public is looking for an experience so to speak, which the monument in ruins cannot provide. There are other voices that say reconstruction is also justified by something else: people for example should not be left to believe people in the Roman Empire lived in floor plans. That is how restorations that openly run against the teaching of the Venice Charter are carried out.

There was similar reconstruction work done recently in Hungary, in Visegrád. The gothic castle, which is situated in beautiful natural surroundings, was built in the 14th century, and it had its golden age under the reign of Matthias Corvinus, our great renaissance sovereign at the end of the 15th century. He had the palace rebuilt and decorated in this new style. The building was completely destroyed in the 16th century, during wars with the Turks, nothing was left of it above ground. Excavation work started in the middle of the

20th century. The restoration of the ceremonial courtyard in the centre was finished by 1960. We know from descriptions that there were three floors, but only the ground floor had been restored, since nothing remained of the other two. Restoration stopped for 40 years and when it continued, the first floor was reconstructed. For the latter, archaeological research was recently continued of course, and a large enough number of fragments was found to make the reconstruction more or less authentic. However, I cannot agree with this, because at least 99% of what was built was constructed using new materials, thus even though there are some original parts built in sporadically, the result cannot be regarded an anastylosis. Even if it is formally authentic, it is still a reconstruction. I have two other concerns about the reconstruction: if the first floor was reconstructed, why was not the second floor reconstructed, too? This way, visitors might think that Matthias’ palace was only one floor high, when in reality there were two upper floors. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the courtyard is appealing to the eye, which is no surprise since it copies the original renaissance one, but from the outside, a meaningless, ugly torso can be seen, that simply reflects a realistic picture of restoration and the architecture of today – provided restorers accepted what the Venice Charter has to say about this: “...any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp.”

The fashion of reconstruction that has been proliferating recently does not stop at ruins. We find more and more buildings with their destroyed parts being reconstructed. And I do not mean amending a tracery, for example. This had also been done previously, and the Charter of Cracow 2000 deals with this question separately: “Reconstruction of very small parts having architectural significance can be acceptable.” The only subject of a debate here is whether the following requirement of the Venice Charter about the replacement is adhered to or not: it “must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.” Nowadays the answer given to this question is more likely to be ‘no’. Still, the example I wish to present here illustrates that reconstruction quite often is replacement of not this nature at all. In the 1930s, the ground floor of an elegant tenement house built in the centre of Budapest at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was occupied by the furnishing workshop of Lajos Kozma, a famous architect of the age. His furniture and interior design represented the vernacular, decorative style. This also appeared on the portal of his atelier, which was destroyed in World War II (the workshop did not exist at that time any more). The house was transformed into a bank in the 1990s, while keeping the original architecture outside, using a modern style of high quality inside. When going through old plans, the designer discovered the plan of Kozma’s portal and reconstructed it, not worrying about a door which leads nowhere, cannot be opened and hides the computers of the

bank. The portal reconstructed has nothing to do with either the original, or the present building, and pedestrians do not understand what it is they can see.

Another reconstruction of an even more monumental nature was also done in Budapest in the 1990s. Béla Lajta, the most excellent Hungarian architect of the age built the Parisiana bar at the beginning of the 20th century. Later on, the building became a theatre, which it still is, but it was rebuilt inside and outside in the 1960s. It may have been because of the dislike for art nouveau that its high-standard and characteristic facade was replaced by one that was characteristic of the age but very ugly. Recent restoration did not make any major changes inside (there was not enough money available for this), but Lajta's facade was reconstructed on the basis of the original plans and photos. It is to be permitted this was very successful, the restoration was awarded Europa Nostra medal, the designers received the highest Hungarian architectural award and the public is pleased to see the reconstruction, too. My opinion is a bit like that of a Pharisee. There is no doubt the townscape improved a lot with the recreation of the original state. In addition, since the building is not a listed monument (it is not one in its present form either), I actually have no objection against reconstruction. If it was a monument, I would probably adopt a stricter attitude. After all, the Venice Charter refers to monuments and not every single building in the world.

From the above examples I can draw the following conclusions. UNESCO and ICOMOS held a conference in 1994 dealing especially with the question of authenticity and

that is how the Declaration of Nara, the most important document since the Venice Charter, was drawn up. Just like at that time, now we also need a similar conference and a document since the Venice Charter, was drawn up. Just like at that time, now we also need a similar conference and a document. This may help us in the clearing up the theoretical chaos and setting up a more unified practice. I fear that without this, the teachings of the Venice Charter may sooner or later be buried in oblivion.

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